

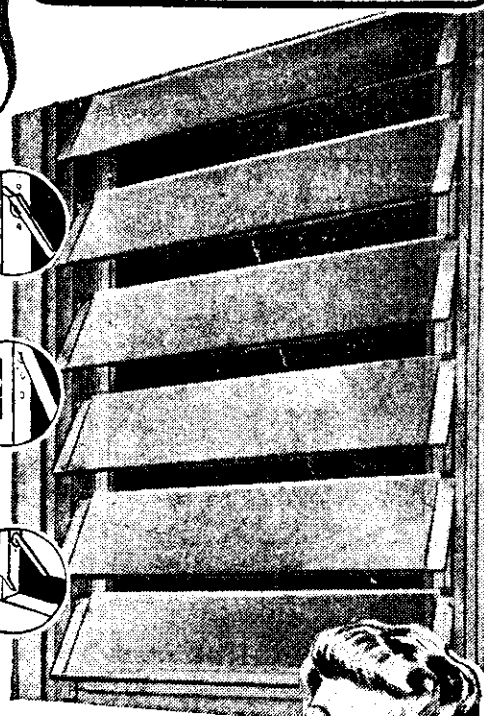
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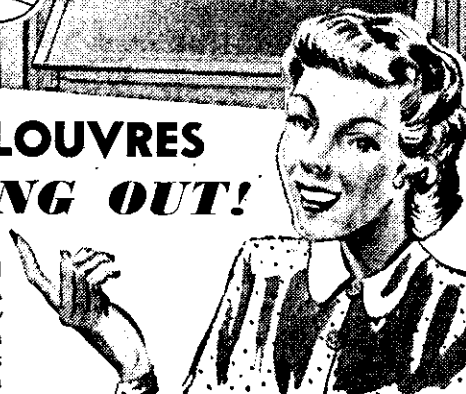
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JANUARY 4, 1952

Murder for Entertainment

IT may be seen from details on page 6 that *The Face of Violence*, a BBC feature to be broadcast this Saturday from 2YC, gives dramatic and symbolical treatment to a question of taste which lately has been much studied and discussed. Some of the theories put forward to explain the ordinary man's interest in brutality are perhaps a little fanciful. It may be true, as is suggested by Dr. J. Bronowski (who wrote the script) that violence indulged vicariously brings adventure to people who lead "narrow and humdrum lives." In these days, however, the sounds of violence are never quite lulled away in the aftermath of war. Millions of men who are now quiet citizens have carried weapons in campaigns which could have given them more than enough action to satisfy a lifetime's craving. Further, the suggestion that most men feel the need of risk and adventure, and glorify the criminal because he personifies their own secret desire to resist the law, seems to imply that the world is more secure and mechanical than it has yet become. Thrillers are certainly as popular in New Zealand, where life remains fairly spacious, as in more congested areas.

Violence in literature and drama is not new. It exists strongly and often crudely in Elizabethan plays; and even in *Clarissa Harlowe*, written in the civilised 18th Century, there are scenes which shock the modern conscience. What is new, perhaps, is the treatment of crime and murder in novels. Two distinct methods may be noticed: the use of swift action and sensational themes by American writers, and the quieter dissection of mystery in England. The Americans are influenced by the cinema; they write with their eyes on Hollywood. In Britain, where violence is used more sparingly in films, the emphasis on action is lighter. The murder is committed, and thereafter the interest of the story is in detection, though there may also be a careful portrayal of character. It would be difficult to explain these

differences without looking closely at national characteristics. In the American attitude may be felt an emotional resistance to death and suffering, as if they were forms of an insupportable ugliness in a world that offers many artificial aids to happiness. The English attitude seems to rest on a longer racial experience. If life is precarious (the poets and thinkers have said for hundreds of years), and if death must come soon or late, we can be ready for our destiny without sitting always in its shadow. There is an almost Elizabethan quality in the American mood; but in Britain the Elizabethans, although much valued and admired, now seem to be a little extravagant in the disposal of corpses and in the passion of utterance.

Nevertheless, whatever we may think of styles and methods, we may have to admit that violence and death are inevitable themes. Imaginative men cannot read the report of a murder trial without remembering that they too could have killed more than once if self-control had failed them. Our dreams sometimes tell us what sort of men we are when restraints are lifted. And the source of dreams is often the unconscious mind whence come the images and feelings that a writer draws into the framework of a novel. The history of mankind is not exclusively a story of war and suffering; but life has never been secure for everybody, and we do not need to put ourselves against the law before we can feel the breath of danger. If there are signs of uneasiness at the preoccupation with brutality, they may mean that we are troubled by social and moral weaknesses which are illustrated in fiction and in films. Cruelty shows the face of evil, and if we see it too often we begin to remember the closeness of Belsen, the extermination of Jews, and sufferings of the innocent in the recent war. In a better world we might think less often of sudden death; but we know what sort of world we are living in, and there would be no true reflection of it in a literature without violence.

N.Z. LISTENER, JANUARY 4, 1952